

Persian Gulf War Posing New Threat To U.S. Interests

Iraq Targets Iran's Main Oil Terminal

By David B. Ottaway
Washington Post Staff Writer

The war between Iran and Iraq, now entering its sixth year, has taken an ominous new turn that U.S. government analysts say poses the most serious threat to U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf since at least the attacks on oil tankers of noncombatants in the spring of 1984 and possibly since the start of the war.

Iraq has declared its intention to destroy Iran's main offshore oil terminal on Kharg Island to halt its exports and yesterday launched the 13th raid since mid-August to demonstrate Baghdad's seriousness. Iran, in turn, has threatened to halt all Arab oil exports from the gulf if Iraq succeeds.

U.S. analysts here believe the Iraqi air attacks, despite extensive damage to the Kharg loading facilities, have so far failed to have a major impact on the level of Iranian oil exports. But oil industry sources based in the gulf increasingly dispute this contention and say Iran's exports are considerably reduced, at least temporarily.

In any case, the analysts here predict that Iran will retaliate if and when its exports are cut "a significant amount," as one put it.

"We have reached a more dangerous phase for oil shipping from the gulf and for U.S. interests in the area," said one government analyst. "There is a greater potential for an inadvertent confrontation involving U.S. interests than ever before."

Among the scenarios envisioned by U.S. sources for such a confrontation are an Iranian air attack against one of the few remaining U.S. oil tankers sailing to the gulf, an Iranian stop-and-search operation on U.S. merchant vessels entering the gulf, an Iranian attempt to close the Strait of Hormuz leading into the gulf, or an Iranian air raid on Saudi facilities in which U.S.-piloted airborne warning and control system (AWACS) planes supporting Saudi warplanes might become involved.

The United States has already warned U.S. vessels to exercise "extreme caution" upon entering gulf waters because of the latest spiral in the war. For some time, the U.S. Navy has offered to escort U.S.-flag ships in the lower gulf—although the Navy offer does not extend to ships heading to Kuwait and other points north.

These escorts are provided either by the five-ship U.S. Mideast Force operating out of Bahrain inside the gulf, or other ships stationed in the Oman Gulf and Indian Ocean.

The sober Reagan administration assessment of the new risks comes as Iraq steps up its air raids on Kharg Island and as Iran increases its practice of occasionally stopping merchant vessels entering the gulf to search for Iraq-destined arms. Iran has also recently launched its first large assault in six months into northern Iraq.

All these signs, U.S. analysts say, point to a higher level of risk-taking in the war by both Iraq and Iran, as well as the unrelenting pursuit by the Iranian religious leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, of his goal of overthrowing Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and his Baathist regime.

In a reference to former president Jimmy Carter and the late Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi of Iran, Richard Helms remarked, "Khomeini thinks he got the shah and Jimmy Carter and he also thinks he can get Saddam Hussein. The perpetuation of this war is kind of a personal vendetta." Helms was U.S. ambassador to Iran from 1973 to 1976 and CIA director during the Nixon administration.

Helms said he was convinced that Iranian leaders were "dead serious" in their threats to retaliate; he said Iranian artillery ashore might begin shelling tankers and other merchant vessels passing through the narrow Hormuz Strait to scare shipping from the gulf.

The war, which Iraq says began with Iranian attacks on Sept. 4, 1980, and Iran says began on Sept. 22 with an Iraqi invasion of Iran, is already probably the most costly conflict in human lives since World War II.

Last January, the Pentagon estimated Iranian casualties—dead and wounded—at 550,000 and Iraq's at 250,000. This week, one U.S. government analyst put the total number of deaths at 300,000 to 350,000, with Iran accounting for 250,000 of them.

Assistant Secretary of State Richard W. Murphy, in testimony before Congress Sept. 18, said the war had also witnessed "the largest-scale use of chemical warfare since World War I." The United States has repeatedly criticized Iraq for using chemical weapons, a charge denied by Iraq.

Most U.S. analysts agree that Iraqi attacks on Kharg represent not only a significant change in Saddam's war tactics but also a new threshold of danger for the entire gulf region. The Arab oil producers, particularly Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, are bracing themselves for

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The odd career of our new man at the United Nations.

AMERICA'S TOP MESSENGER BOY

BY MICHAEL MASSING

THE SENATE confirmation hearing last May for Vernon A. Walters, nominated to replace Jeane Kirkpatrick as ambassador to the United Nations, lasted exactly 48 minutes. Most of them were given over to flattery and deference. Democrat Joseph Biden, for one, could hardly contain himself: "I have only been here going on 13 years," he said, "and I think you are about the most fascinating guy who has ever appeared before us. . . . You are a man of extraordinarily broad range. Yours is a career that is something the novelists make up." Walters's nomination sailed through without dissent.

This was the fifth confirmation hearing in Walters's long career, and all have been equally pro forma. Vernon "Dick" Walters, now 68 years old, commands respect. He was with Harriman in Paris at the birth of the Marshall Plan, with Truman at Wake Island when he confronted MacArthur, with Nixon when his car was attacked

Michael Massing wrote "CBS Under Siege" in the May 6 issue of TNR. He writes frequently on foreign affairs.

by angry mobs in Venezuela. He smuggled Henry Kissinger in and out of Paris during his secret talks with the Chinese and North Vietnamese. And, as deputy director of the CIA from 1972 to 1976, he was one of the few Nixon appointees to emerge from Watergate with his reputation intact.

Over the last four years Walters has traveled to 108 countries in his job as ambassador-at-large for the Reagan administration. From Mengistu Haile Mariam to the pope, Walters undertook the administration's most sensitive diplomatic missions. When Roberto d'Aubuisson threatened to get out of hand in El Salvador, it was Walters who went to straighten him out. And when Fidel Castro expressed his willingness to talk with the United States, it was Walters who was dispatched to meet him.

Personally as well as professionally, Walters seems larger than life. Fluent in seven foreign languages, he has frequently been called on to translate for presidents. On visiting a foreign land, Walters has been known to arrive early and ride the buses for a day in order to pick up the

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Personalities

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That BBC film crew shooting the movie "Mirror Image," starring Tommy Lee Jones, was at Trumpets restaurant with the Connecticut Avenue eatery playing the part of a Geneva café. "Mirror Image" has something to do with spies and the CIA. The filmmakers didn't know it but Trumpets' owner Allen McKelvie is the stepson of former CIA director Richard Helms . . .

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QUOTE_LINES

"The Russians and their satellites are robbing us blind.
It's as simple as that."

— Richard Helms, former CIA director

"If Tiedge passes on all his knowledge, this will mean
immense damage for West Germany's intelligence work."

— Hans Neusel, West German official

"Espionage is a professional thing that is separate from
politics. We spy on them and they spy on us."

— Richard Meier, formerly of West German intelligence

"The Tricot Report takes the French people for idiots."

— Alain Madelin, French legislator, on the report
that cleared secret service of sinking Rainbow Warrior

"We have more people charged with espionage right
now than ever before in our history."

— FBI Director William Webster